



Illustration: Paul Mason

Learn to Surf Kayak Technique

Essential Skills to Get You on the Wave

Details

WRITTEN BY Conor Mihell

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ANATOMY OF THE SURF ZONE

SHOULDER

The edges of a breaking wave will often stay green and glassy longer than the top-heavy middle section, making longer, smoother rides possible.

SPILLING SURF

The safest place to learn to surf is off of a gently sloping beach where the swells release their energy gradually.

DUMPING SURF

Swells break explosively at the edge of a sharp drop-off like a shoal or a steep beach, or at a river mouth. Dumping surf offers the potential for tube rides, but it's also the most challenging.

SOUP

A quiet field of foamy water forms at the end of the surf zone.

RIP CURRENT

Wave energy can reflect off of the beach and creates a strong offshore current, which can be used to

your advantage when launching in surf but creates a hazard for swimmers. To escape a rip current, swim perpendicular to the current to reach waves that will wash you ashore.

SURF ZONE SKILLS

1. Paddling Out

You don't have the option of duck-diving in a kayak, so choose your exit route carefully. Scout the beach beforehand, looking for deep-water channels where breaking waves are less common. If you must punch through a breaking wave, paddle like hell, knife your paddle through the wave and reach for the green water on the other side. Keep your deck free of gear.

2. Catching a Wave

The idea is to match the speed of the wave. Position yourself beyond the line of breakers. Faster boats such as sea kayaks can catch non-breaking swells offshore or on the shoulder of the surf zone—far less intimidating places to start out. Look over your shoulder as you paddle with the waves. When you see a wave you want to catch, sit upright and paddle forward aggressively with powerful, rapid-fire strokes as the wave lifts your stern. If your timing is right, your kayak will accelerate as it slides down the face of the wave. If you don't quite have the speed, you might find yourself perched on the crest. Throw your weight forward and be prepared for a thrilling ride.

3. Riding the Face

As you rocket down the wave's face, lean back slightly and perform a stern rudder with your paddle to slow down and wait for the crest of the wave to catch up. Shorter, more rockered sea kayaks and surf kayaks can carve turns on the face of a wave just like board surfers. Steer with your hips and your paddle: Edge your boat into the wave while performing a stern rudder on the down-wave (opposite) side.

4. Broaching and Side-Surfing

Broaching occurs when your kayak's bow digs into the trough and gets the stern pushed broadside by the wave's breaking crest. The longer the kayak, the more prone it is to broaching. If you catch it early, it's possible to avoid a broach by leaning back to unbury the bow and aggressively edging and ruddering to carve back on course. Failing that, lean hard into the wave, tuck your elbows in close to your ribcage and side-surf with your paddle braced into the foam pile, using a low brace or high brace depending on wave height.

5. Spins

To spin out of a broach, tilt into the wave and turn your brace into a forward sweep. Don't expect to spin more than 90 degrees in a sea kayak, just enough to regain your front surf; you may need to coax your boat into the spin by leaning back to free the bow. Flat-hulled whitewater and surf kayaks spin more easily—even on the green face of a wave. Alternate between forward and reverse sweeps, remembering to shift your weight from edge to edge, keeping the boat tilted into the wave.

6. Loops

Big, steep waves can toss sea kayaks end over end. To perform a loop, sit perpendicular on the crest of a wave and throw your weight forward, burying the bow in the trough. If the wave is big enough, your stern will be thrown skyward, leaving you standing on the foot pegs, well above the whitewater. From here, it's possible to pirouette by planting a sweep stroke in the wave crest; otherwise, get ready for a high-speed crash landing. Hold your breath, wait for the wave to pass, and roll up.